# Researching Gender, Social Class and Educational Achievement in the Pre-School

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## Resumen/ Abstract

This paper is part of a wider PhD study focusing on the impact of gender on the educational achievement of children in the early years of schooling with a focus on the impact of social class. The first part of the paper will address the methodological, practical and ethical issues and challenges that are encountered in educational research with children as young as three. Attempting to address such issues with young children themselves, rather than with their parents, teachers and other adult gatekeepers, adds further new dimensions and challenges to the research process.

A discussion will be included in the paper on the feasibility of researching pre-school children and the impact of child centred research on the choice of suitable data collection methods. This discussion will include a consideration of young children's competency to participate in social research and their capacity to give informed consent, whilst simultaneously addressing the issue of power imbalances and the differing styles of communication between adults and children that must be bridged effectively for social research to be successful. As well as a consideration of gender and social class constructions and their relationship with educational achievement, issues around the re-conceptualisation of children as subjects of research, and the implications of this position for educational research, will be explored alongside practical and innovative suggestions for interviewing young children about their experiences.

The data upon which this paper is based are taken from an ethnographic case study in one pre-school classroom in the northeast of Northern Ireland and will draw upon data gathered during detailed classroom observations and small, friendship grouped pupil interviews. Through a full discussion of the results of this study the second part of the paper will aim to explore the construction and maintenance of gender identities by those pupils involved, the discursive possibilities provided by the dominant gender discourse and how these possibilities prescribe not only how children learn but also what they learn. This will include a consideration of the gendered and educational discourses prevalent in the classroom, the pupils' stereotypical and often polarized play choices and friendship patterns and the perceived imbalance of ability between the genders. Issues of curriculum and assessment in the early years will be explored by drawing on data from a teacher interview and it will be argued that the diverse (and highly gendered) discursive possibilities in this pre-school setting may induce the construction of differing self or peer group imposed boundaries/obstacles to the learning opportunities of young children.

**Palabras clave / Keywords**: Educational Achievement, Pre-School, Gender, Social Class

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## 1. Problems in Interviewing Young Children

Over the past decade, there has been much concern over the apparent lack of research carried out *with* children as apposed to *on* children, a situation which many researchers have sought to address (Pugh and Selleck 1996; Morrow and Richards; Christensen and James 2000; Woodhead and Faulkner 2000; Brooker 2001; Kortesluoma et al 2003). However, the literature also points out that this approach, termed the new social studies of childhood (Christensen and James 2000), brings with it many methodological, ethical and practical challenges and it is these challenges that will be addressed in this paper. Impediments to reliability are common in research with young children and include issues such as children's distractibility, limited memory capacities and their willingness to lie. Levels of linguistic development also play an important role, because very young children may be prone to classification errors and find it difficult to respond to questions of 'when?' or 'how?' particularly as their sense of time is not fully developed until they are of school age.

Other problems with interviewing children provide ethical challenges, for example ensuring that children do not feel uncomfortable, intimidated or threatened during the interview, that some children do not dominate the conversation or are particularly destructive or negative towards one another's views or opinions (for a full discussion of these issues see Lewis 1992; Greig and Taylor 1999; Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000).

These varying challenges can be broadly grouped into four themes, each of which must be addressed in any methodological discussion of child research. The first part of this paper will outline the main issues in each of these themes, whereas the second part will draw upon an ethnographic case study to examine how the debates and issues in each section relate to the practice of research with young children.

## 2. Young Children's Competence

Curtin (2001:296) points out that a common problem when interviewing children is that the researcher often assumes children are less competent than adults in general and the researcher in particular. Researchers may therefore assume their own levels of knowledge to be superior to those of the children they interview.

Kortesluoma et al (2003:436) further this discussion by drawing on Piaget's (1972) preoperational and concrete operations stages of development, in order to assess the competency of children between the ages of 2-6 and 7-11 years old respectively. With respect to the preoperational stage, which addresses children of the age that I wish to interview, they argue that words may have either a broader or more limited meaning to young children, and that such children may often answer questions correctly, but in a one sided, egocentric way.

In a conclusion of their discussion on cognitive development theories Kortesluoma et al assert that children understand the world in largely different ways

from adults. Pugh and Selleck (1996) and Greig and Taylor (1999) confirm this position by showing that the notion of children as incompetent may come from an over-reliance on their linguistic capacities.

> *"Greig and Taylor (1999) propose that very young children have limited communicative capacities in relation to school-aged children, but they are amazingly competent in many ways not usually appreciated by researchers"*
>
> *Kortesluoma et al (2003)*

> *"Young children are more creative and advanced in their thinking than many adults give them credit for and the skilful adult… is able through observation and listening to gain real insight into children's preoccupations, thoughts and feelings…….. Young children are well able to voice their ideas."*
>
> *Pugh and Selleck (1996)*

Liz Brooker (2001) in her chapter on *Interviewing Children* draws on a number of well-known studies (Tizard and Hughes 1984; Spencer and Flin 1990) to highlight the fact that children can be reliable respondents. Highlighting the results of these studies, she illustrates how young children may answer questions in an egocentric way but that,

> "the real danger of egocentrism may be the egocentricity of the adult who is unable to appreciate fully the child's perspective in an interview"
>
> *Spencer and Flin (1990) in Brooker (2001)*

Martin and Richards argue that children's perceived incompetence serves only to 'reflect a cultural reluctance to take children's ideas seriously' and that adults 'tend to trivialise and devalue children's acts as a matter of course' –instead they argue strongly that 'sociologists can and should take children seriously as social actors in their own right, as sources of valid sociological data (Martin and Richards 1996:98)

## 3. Informed Consent

In order that we may take children seriously as sources of data, we must first consider the issue of informed consent, not just as a stand-alone issue but also within a wider ethical framework, which should be applied to all research with adults or with children. Turning to informed consent more specifically, the literature focuses on the fact that, in educational research, consent has traditionally been an issue for parents, teachers or other gatekeepers rather than, and sometimes in spite of, the children's own wishes and opinions (Evans and Fuller 1996; Morrow and Richards 1996).

With respect to ethical guidelines emanating from professional bodies, those most allied with the type of research I am carrying out are the Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research issued by the British Educational Research Association (BERA: 2004). Whilst specific references to very young children, i.e. children between the ages three and five are scarce throughout the document, nevertheless the guidelines given are important.

Articles 10 and 11 relate specifically to the topic of informed consent, deemed *'the condition in which participants understand and agree to their participation without*

*any duress, prior to the research getting underway'*. In further detail, it is explained that

> *'Researchers must take the steps necessary to ensure that all participants in the research understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported.*
>
> BERA (2004:5)

Morrow and Richards discuss the issue of a child's age in relation to their competency to consent to participation in research and by drawing on the examples of medical research (Morrow and Richards 1996:94) conclude that decisions of competency to consent should not be based on chronological age. The question is however, what level of competence do children require to enable them to participate in educational research? Should they be denied the opportunity to choose to participate solely based on their age?

BERA guidelines do address this issue by drawing on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and specifying that with respect to Children, Vulnerable Young People and Vulnerable Adults:

*'The Association requires researchers to comply with Articles 3 and 12 of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 3 requires that in all actions concerning the child, the best interests of the child must be the primary consideration. Article 12 requires that children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity. Children should therefore be facilitated to give fully informed consent.'*

*BERA (2004:6)*

Having considered the literature on informed consent from children, I proposed that a combination of consent should be sought for my research. While it is valid that children should be 'given full information about what the research and interview entail' (Kortesluoma et al 2003:437) and a free choice of participation to exercise during the entire process, it is nevertheless true that young children may not be able to fully appreciate the implications of their decisions. This understanding also has implications for the practicalities of carrying out the research, for example, Evans and Fuller (1996:17) argue that any interview schedule for use with children should take into account children's wishes and should afford all those involved the freedom of choice to participate.

## 4. The Unequal Balance of Power

Kortesluoma et al (2003) state that an interactive and cooperative relationship is the main success of any interview, however many researchers have noted the imbalance of power which often characterises interviews, both with adults and more particularly, with children (Lewis 1992; Evans and Fuller 1996; Curtin 2001; Kortesluoma 2003).

Curtin (2001:296) argues that this is often because the adult is taken to be in an authority position, which affects the children's levels of comfort and hence affects the thoughts and feelings they express. Evans and Fuller (1996) expand further on this relationship by drawing on the work of Kimmel (1988) and Hall (1996) to highlight how children who are disadvantaged by this power imbalance often experience anxiety and stress. Hall emphasises, they argue, that

> *"The power dynamics inherent in the adult/child relationship provide a context in which children can quickly become disadvantaged when being interviewed"*
>
> (Hall 1996:88 in Evans and Fuller1996: 17)

Aside from the obvious distress and ethical issues arising from this relationship, it has been demonstrated that this situation is also not conducive to successful research. Children can often feel intimidated to the point of absent, incorrect or monosyllabic answers as shown by the examples of difficulties in child interviewing (Lewis 1992:417; Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000:287).

The challenge then is to ensure that the power inequalities in adult/child interview relationships are minimised. It is understood that no matter what innovative strategies we may employ, researchers cannot become children. Many suggestions have been utilised to address this problem for example getting to know the children before interviewing them (Pugh and Selleck 1996; Evans and Fuller 1996; Kortesluoma et al 2003), drawing pictures before the interview as an introduction (Faux et al 1988) - something which can be viewed as a research method in itself (Kendrick and McKay 2004; Burkitt 2004) - and generally providing an open and relaxed atmosphere in which children can communicate their experiences.

## 5. Styles of Communication

Communication is of vital importance in any interview and arguably even more so in interviews with young children. Young children often communicate in very different ways than adults; they may rely on 'non-verbal communication' (Curtin 2001:298); they may be better able to understand mono- rather than multi-syllabic words (Wilson 1995); they may give illogical answers (Kortesluoma et al 2003) and so communication with children may take more time and effort than with adults (Curtin 2001) due to the fact that very young children are often disadvantaged in interviews by their early stage of linguistic development. The challenge for the researcher then, is to find a way to communicate with young children at their own personal stage of linguistic development, what Curtin (2001:298) calls 'bridging different styles of communication'. There are two things that the researcher must do to enable this to occur: firstly, they should focus on the linguistic aspects of their own personal style of communication that may be altered to help understanding for the children and secondly they should explore the ways in which children's non-verbal communication can be observed and understood.

Curtin (2001) argues that to achieve the former of these two things researchers must refrain from using complex language and should learn to understand the meaning in children's often very short phrases and answers, as well as allowing children plenty

of time to answer any questions. Kortesluoma et al (2003: 438) also assert that the opening questions of an interview are the key to its success and that researchers should take care to formulate questions in a way that children can understand.

Brooker (2001) shows how direct questioning of children may also have a negative impact on the interview, and argues that the key is not to ask direct questions that require specific answers. She draws on the work of Hutt et al (1989) to show that a better approach is to use the researcher's own views as a stimulus for discussion. As an example, rather than asking a child in my research 'What do you learn in school every day?' which may involve a belief on the part of the child that I already know the answer to this question, Brooker suggests framing the question as though I have no knowledge and wish to ask the child as an expert in this area 'I don't really know what children learn in nursery school – Do you think you could help me and tell me what you learn in nursery? Hutt et al (1989) refer to this method as 'out-loud thinking' a technique, which I feel, is invaluable to my own research.

A second point raised by Glenda MacNaughton in her Chapter 'Too Young To Notice' (2000) is the importance of asking children 'Why? MacNaughton suggested that they ask the children why they did or didn't play with certain activities, but this was rejected by many of the teachers. They felt that the children were too young and not sufficiently knowledgeable to answer this question - they simply were not 'gender knowing' (MacNaughton 2000:94). One teacher in the group consistently used 'Why?' Questions to uncover children's knowledge about gender roles and by considering this alongside Canella's (1997) 'discourse of innocence' MacNaughton shows how vital children's answers to these questions are in informing researchers' understandings of children's gender knowledge. This use of 'why' may help researchers find more meaning in children's answers by giving children an opportunity to explain what they mean by certain comments or phrases themselves.

With respect to understanding and exploring young children's non-verbal communication, observations and drawings can be used for this purpose. Kendrick and McKay (2004) have demonstrated how drawings can be used as a form of data collection and may be subjected to qualitative analysis. It is argued that by using drawings as a means of research we represent a recognition of the child's ability to communicate using a variety of forms of representation whereby we can explore children's understandings of topics and concepts (Kendrick and McKay 2004:112)

Pugh and Selleck (1996), Greig and Taylor (1999) and Kendrick and McKay (2004) have recognised the benefits that can come from this approach; namely the fact that *'their drawings communicate the diverse ways in which they (the children) see themselves and others' (Kendrick and McKay 2004:125)* however, *'it is crucial for these drawings to be correlated with a variety of other sources of information' (Greig and Taylor 1999:79)* to avoid false interpretations.

This approach has a lot to offer child centred research, particularly if it should prove difficult to ascertain the views of young children from interviews alone. Drawings may prove beneficial, not only as an encouragement and introduction to interviews, but also as props used to guide, inform and stimulate interviews and observations.

The perspectives, issues and challenges explored in this paper in no way form an exhaustive or prescriptive list of matters that early years educational researchers must address in their work, however they do represent an account of the many challenges I have personally faced in my own research into gender issues with young children. For the remainder of the paper I wish to consider how some of these issues have influenced, shaped and guided my own research by drawing on data from an ethnographic case study of one pre-school class.

## A) The School

The nursery unit upon which the data are based is located within a socially deprived, working class housing estate in the northeast of Northern Ireland. The area is characterised by severe social problems, a large amount of paramilitary graffiti is on display on the sides of houses in the area, and all but one of the houses which back onto the entrance to the nursery unit are derelict and boarded up.

The unit comprises of one nursery class, one community playgroup class, a special needs facility and various other community initiatives, which include mums and toddlers meetings, baby massage classes etc. It is a busy unit, physically detached from its neighbouring sister primary school, which was purpose built approximately six years earlier for the community as a result of a partnership between the Early Years Project and the local Education and Library Board. The classroom is large and spacious, very bright and completely self contained and the outdoor area is shared with the next-door classroom but is very large and open. Twenty-six children (thirteen boys and thirteen girls) attended the nursery unit, six (four girls and two boys) of which were penultimates (i.e. under three years of age and entitled to two years of nursery instead of one). Staff in the nursery consisted of one teacher; one qualified teaching assistant and three teaching students (one full time, two part time). The school day starts at 9am with the arrival of the children, followed by 45minutes of planned indoor play from 9.45-10am. Break-time is held between 10.15-10.45am followed by an hour and 15mins outdoor play. Lunchtime occurs between 12-12.30pm and then children play outdoors until home time at 1.30pm. Outdoor play is obviously weather permitting, although the nursery do provide wet gear which means the children can play outside in most weather conditions.

In order to get the most from the interviews I decided to incorporate stimulus material and so the children were set the task of drawing a picture about their experiences of learning in nursery and I explained from the outset that I had brought my teddy along because, like me, he wanted to learn about what boys and girls learned at nursery and what they liked to do there. After the drawings were completed, the teddy would be passed around and children in turn would tell the story of their picture to it. This gave me the opportunity to hear from one child at a time and I was then able to ask the children more questions about who they played with and what their favourite thing about nursery was. By doing this, it was possible to introduce the children to the interview through a familiar activity, which was not intimidating to them but which still, allowed me to develop the discussion, and hence my understanding of the children's gendered educational experiences, through non-directive questioning. An environment was created whereby the children could take control of what they wanted to talk about, while simultaneously ensuring fairness for all involved by avoiding dominance of the conversation by one child. .

As well as recognising the different styles of communication that children used, the group interview was also successful in redressing some of the imbalances of power between the children and me however, perhaps most importantly, my approach to the interview situation resulted in all of the children interviewed chatting contentedly to me and I noticed no sense of the apprehension, intimidation or discomfort which other researchers have reported.

During the study, I carried out ongoing detailed classroom observations of the children and conducted seven group interviews with the children. The number of children varied from a minimum of two in one group to a maximum of four in another. The interviews were carried out in a separate room, attached to the classroom which was normally used in the mornings before the first period of planned play to start the day off with rhymes songs, stories etc. Children were given a free choice of whether or not they wished to participate, and all children who were asked agreed to take part except two, although on several occasions individual children asked to leave the interview part way through and were allowed to do so. Consent was asked for all children to be interviewed but was obtained for only twenty of them. Children were interviewed in small friendship groups primarily to ease any discomfort or intimidation that the children may have felt about the interview situation, but also to allow me to explore with the children the possible role of friendships and peer groups on their constructions of gender and their learning.

**B) Friendship patterns and Play choices**

Within a matter of days of starting the research it became very clear during my observations that the children's friendship groups were by and large delineated upon the basis of gender. By far the largest friendship group identifiable in the class was that of Amy, Danielle, Kerry, Lisa and Anna (all names in this report are pseudonyms) who formed a formidable group and nearly always played together, either as a collective or in smaller groups of two or three. The rest of the girls in the class tended to be found in small groups of two or three or in very rare circumstances they played with a boy from the class. The boys in the class were equally likely to show marked divisions in friendships based on gender and whilst they tended to form several small groups of two or three boys they usually only came together as a larger group when they played football.

I was keen to explore this with the children during the interviews and made a point of asking them about their friendship patterns within the class, however whilst it was not uncommon for girls and boys to indicate children of the opposite gender as being someone they play with, on several occasions they made reference to the fact that boys and girls more generally did not play together. In the first of these excerpts I was exploring with four of the girls Amy, Kerry, Lisa and Anna why they did not like to play with the boys in the class. Both Amy and Kerry had already informed me that they played with some of the boys, but only for specific reasons. In Amy's case she indicated that her favourite play area was the home corner and that all of the girls played together and Gary was the Daddy because it had to be a boy to play that. Kerry

indicated that she liked to play with only two of the boys Connor who was her boyfriend and his friend Alan. Lisa however chose not to play with any of the boys.

**CW:** Why don't you play with the boys Lisa?

**Lisa:** Because…. because they don't want to

**CW:** Why do they not want to?

**Lisa:** Because they play on their own boys

**CW:** And what do they say if you ask them to play with you?

**Lisa:** They still don't play with you

**CW:** But are they nice to you?

**Lisa:** Yes, they are, but they still won't play with us

The second excerpt from a later interview with Kerry and Danielle showed a similar pattern. The interview initially started with Callum and Joe also but they asked to leave after the drawing part of the interview was completed. Kerry indicates that she does play with two of the boys, Joe and Gary but it seems that this only applies to certain types of play:

**CW:** Who do you play with then?

**Kerry:** With Danielle

**CW:** And who else?

**Kerry:** Amy and Joe and Gary

**CW:** And what do Joe and Gary like to play with.

**Kerry:** They play with the bikes and scooters

**CW:** Bikes and scooters. They play football as well don't they?

**Kerry:** Yea they play and we let them do whatever they like

**CW:** Why

**Kerry:** Coz we don't ask them to do things

**CW:** [] And would they do it if you asked do you think

**Kerry:** They just want to do whatever they like and we let them do it, go for it

**Dan:** I play with Gary and Joe sometimes

**CW:** Do you? And are they fun to play with?

**Dan:** Yes. Only if you play football

In both of these excerpts, the girls speaking appear to be rater philosophical about the fact that boys and girls don't play together, that that's just how it is and they all get on with things. However not all of the children shared these views and in some

cases they went as far as to announce their dislike for the opposite gender. Alan and Connor alongside Callum were discussing with me who Callum liked to play with in nursery but when I ask if he plays with any of the girls his reaction is rather extreme and quite at odds with the opinions of the other two boys present.

**CW:** [] What about the girls, do you play with any of the girls in nursery?

**Cal:** Ugh! I don't like girls!

**CW:** Why don't you like girls?

**Cal:** I hate them!

**CW:** But why do you hate them? What is it about?

**Cal:** They kiss boys. And his girlfriend is Kerry *(points to Connor)*

**CW:** I know that, Connor told me yesterday

**Cal:** I hate Kerry!

**CW:** Why do you hate Kerry?

**Con:** But she doesn't kiss me in school

**CW:** Does she kiss you outside?

**Con:** Yeah I…

**CW:** What's that Connor?

**Con:** I kiss her!

**CW:** You kiss her? But I thought you didn't like girls because they kiss boys

**Con:** I do now

**CW:** Alan, do you not like girls because they kiss boys?

**Alan:** No, it's not good. I just kiss mummy.

**CW:** Oh, I see!

**Con:** But I kiss Kerry

**Alan:** His girlfriend is Kerry but my girlfriend is called Julie

**CW:** Julie oh I see

Then later when Callum leaves the interview early, I take the opportunity to ask Alan and Connor why they think Callum dislikes the girls in the class so much.

**CW:** [] Who else do you play with in nursery?

**Alan:** Emmm Melissa and Zoë and Amy and

**Con:** Me

**CW:** So you don't hate the girls then like Callum does? Why do you think he hates them so much?

**Alan:** Cause

**Con:** Cause he doesn't like us cause we go out with girls

It was also not the case that children only disliked children of the opposite gender as part of my interview with Joanne, Melissa, Michael and David shows. Joanne was one of the penultimate children in the class and as such was younger than many of others. She also tended to be one of the children who freely roamed around the classroom, chose to play with non-stereotypical toys and did not seem to have a particular friendship group of her own, rather she chose to play where she wanted and with whoever else happened to be there. Through observations, I noticed that she tended to be quite domineering of the other children and over activities in which they were involved and it caused many rows during the period of observation. Joanne's interview reflected strong feelings of dislike towards both genders in the wider class:

**CW:** [] That's very nice Joanne. What do you play with in nursery and who do you play with?

**Jo:** I play with David

**CW:** David and is that it?

**Jo:** Yeah

**CW:** Nobody else?

**Jo:** Nope

**CW:** Do you not like to play with any of the other boys?

**Jo:** Nope

**CW:** Why not?

**Jo:** Coz I'm…I don't like the other boys

**CW:** And why don't you like them?

**Jo:** Coz they won't share with you

**CW:** Why do you think they won't share?

**Jo:** Coz they like to keep winding me

**CW:** They what?

**Jo:** Wind me up

**CW:** [] And what about the other girls? Do you not play with Amy and Kerry?

**Jo:** No coz Amy just slapped me

**CW:** That's not very nice

**M:** No, it's not

**CW:** Why did she do that Joanne?

**Jo:** Coz she wouldn't give me the fire engine

**CW:** She wouldn't give you the fire engine. So do you never play with any of those girls?

**Jo:** Nope I just play with Melissa

As shown through these examples the children's friendship patterns were highly influenced by gender and so too were their patterns of play choice. The activities available to the children vary from week to week and always included activities that could be deemed stereotypical boy or girl activities. For example the home corner, traditionally a girl's activity was transformed from a café to a hospital and then to a simultaneous camping and dressing up area (girls' clothes only) during the time I was carrying out the research. Other 'girls' activities include the lacing tables with beads and necklaces to thread and also the 'girls world' table with dolls heads to brush and comb and dress with jewellery. In terms of activities that were more 'boy' orientated there was floor play which, during the research was first based around trains and then a pirate ship, and also the dough table during my research was focused firstly on minibeasts (i.e. spiders and bugs etc) and then cars wheels and signs. Neutral activities consisted of the sand and water tray with various different foci e.g. farm animals, the beach, marble run and then also the craft table, which tended to be the only activity at which an adult was always present.

Both the interview data and the classroom observations showed that the children had very clear ideas about which activities were for girls and for boys and they also had firm opinions about what boys and girls do and do not do. For example the following rather long extract from an interview with Amy, Joe, Chloe and Alan shows how both the boys and the girls are actively constructing what it means to be a boy or a girl in terms of their play.

**CW:** Well anyway, what do you learn at nursery?

**Joe:** I learn motorbikes

**CW:** About motorbikes. And what else?

**Joe:** Cars and trucks

**CW:** Oh, is that what the boys play with in school?

**Joe:** Yeah and trains

**CW:** Do the girls play with those?

**Joe:** No

**Chloe:** I do!

**Amy:** Yeah

**CW:** Do you play with cars Amy?

**Amy:** They're not for girls

**Chloe:** And tractors

**Amy;** But you know what, I'm gonna get a real car when I grow up

**Chloe:** Me too I'm getting a car

**CW:** But I thought they weren't for girls?

**Amy:** Only playing with them

**CW:** [] Now Joe who do you play with in nursery?

**Joe:** Emmm…Steven and Gary…and James

**CW:** [] James too. And what do you play with them?

**Joe:** Cars

**CW:** And what do you play outside?

**Joe:** Football

**CW:** Do you like football?

**Joe:** Yeah

**Amy:** I don't

**CW:** Why do you not like football Amy?

**Amy:** Coz I don't [] Yes *(claps three times*) Yes *(claps three times like a football chant almost)*

**CW:** Very good Amy. Do you like football?

**Amy:** Yes

**Chloe:** Yes

**CW:** So why do you girls never play football?

**Chloe &Amy:** *(they begin to chant together)* Football! *(Three claps)* Football! *(Three claps*) Football *(three claps-this goes on until I ask them to stop)*

**CW:** ok I think that's enough. Very good, but Amy why do you and Chloe not play football if you like it?

**Amy:** Ehh no coz

**CW:** Coz why Amy?

**Joe:** Coz they play with Barbies

**CW:** Is that right Joe?

**Amy:** Hey we don't! *(She leans over and shouts at Joe)*

**CW:** Is that not right Amy?

**Joe:** You do

**Amy:** Don't

**Joe:** You do

**Amy:** We don't

**Joe:** Do

**Amy:** We don't

**CW:** Does that mean because they play with Barbies they can't play football? *(They all begin to shout and argue)* Could you all come back and sit down because I'd like Joe to tell me why he thinks girls can't play football because they like to play with Barbies?

**Joe:** Because they do

**Amy:** Not

**Joe:** I'm fed up

**Amy:** Why?

**Joe:** With you (points at Amy)

Throughout the research, there were many examples of this kind of gender category maintenance and it was of great importance to the children that they were correctly categorized within the boundaries of their gender as the following field note excerpt shows:

***Morning break 10/05/06***

*I noticed today that many of the children were very concerned to label themselves as boys or girls in particular Chloe, Philip, Danielle, Gary, Joe and Amy. They would take it in turns to point to each person at their table and count 'one boy, two boys' or 'one girl, two girls' and say the gender of whomever they pointed at. From time to time one of them would (seemingly intentionally) make a mistake in categorizing one of the children and when this happened the others would laugh and shout 'no that's a boy/girl!' Clearly, it is intolerable to all of them to be positioned wrongly, as many have shown in role-play also*

Prior to this, I had also noticed several incidents of children engaged in this kind of maintenance of gender norms, both boys and girls; although for the boys, it appears to be much more quickly noticed by their peers if they are in breach of the boundaries

***Morning round room 8/5/06***

*Kelly and me are talking to Philip, Melissa, Danielle, Zoë and Callum. As Callum enters the room, Kelly notices blue on his nails and asks him if he is wearing nail polish. Callum shakes his head but before he can say anything Philip stands up, points at him and chants 'You're wearing nail polish, you're wearing nail polish! Then he laughs at Callum. Callum gets upset and shouts 'Am not' but Philip doesn't let up even when Kelly tells him it is only play dough. Ironically Philip is one of the boys who spends a lot of time with the girls and is often involved in the more stereotypically female activities such as dressing up as he later goes on to do that day in the pink dress announcing 'I'm a princess'*

The implications of being positioned by your peers as the 'wrong' gender were clearly not favorable and all of the children wished to avoid it. There was however, one child in the class who had a particular problem with being wrongly positioned and this was Chloe. Chloe was very different in appearance to all of the other girls in the class because of her height, the fact that she was physically bigger than the rest of the girls and that she had very short hair. On several occasions, Chloe spoke to me about the fact that she did not seem to fit in with the rest of the girls.

***Afternoon outdoor play 5/5/06***

*Chloe is sitting alone on top of the basketball post, which has fallen over. As I walk past she looks up at me, sighs and says 'Julie wont play with me!' I ask her why not and if she had asked if she could play. She replies 'yes but she said no. They never want to play with me' when I ask why not she tells me 'Because I have short hair and I look like a boy'*

***Planned play 8/5/06***

*Chloe has chosen to play at the home corner with Zoë, Melissa and Julie. They all dress up but Chloe doesn't and when I ask why she tells met that Julie wants her to be the daddy and that she doesn't want to. When I ask her why not she says matter of factly 'Because I'm a girl not a daddy' I ask can she not pretend to be but she tells me 'Yes but I don't want to. I'm a girl not a boy. They can't see that [] daddies don't wear dresses; they wear trousers and shoes but not strappy tops and dresses'*

**6. Perceived imbalance of ability between the genders**

At various stages during my time in the class I was aware of a general discourse surrounding the boys, which positioned them intrinsically less capable in various ways than their female peers. For example the excerpt from my field notes below shows a conversation with a substitute teacher, Mary, and the teaching assistant, Laura, recorded relatively early on in the research during a general discussion about the day's events after the children have left. We get to talking about my research and Mary asks me how the interview I had conducted that afternoon went:

**Mary:** So how did they do for you? Sorry I've forgotten what it is you're researching!

**CW:** It's the impact of gender on children in the early years of schooling- basically how their gender affects their learning

**Laura:** Because it does!

**CW:** Well that's what I would argue

**Mary:** So it's better to be a girl

**CW:** That's not always the case…

**Laura:** In the early years of school it is

**Mary:** It does seem like girls do better

**Laura:** How I would describe it is like a race. If girls and boys lined up on the starting blocks the girls would come out faster

**Mary:** That's a good way of looking at it

**Laura:** Yeah Clare you can remember that analogy *(Laughs*)

This is not the only time that this is mentioned during the research. Whilst chatting to Angela (the class teacher) and Laura early on in my time at the school about my research I mention that the girls in the class fascinate me with the way they interact and that this surprises me as my previous experience is that the boys are more likely to band together in a large group and partake in activities which reinforce the dominant forms of masculinity.

***25/4/06 After School***

*'Yes but I think the boys here aren't like that because of their immaturity. They are very hard to engage. In fact the outdoor play this year is terrible isn't it (she asks Laura) I have hated it, its really awful. It got so bad we had to just pack all the equipment away. For example the minibeasts hunt. Previous years you could have engaged them with that for ages but now you leave them and when you come back they've all run off to other things and the magnifying glasses are all smashed or lying on the ground. Or you start a game of something and two or three of them won't do it and before you know it you have a group and you just can't'. Laura then adds 'And it's usually a boy who starts it off*'

The general discourse in the classroom then seems to position boys as problematic and inferior to girls, not only in terms of their developmental level, but also as more boisterous, disruptive and unreliable and this discourse clearly impacts on the children's early curriculum experiences.

**CW**: So do you notice with this class differences between genders in respect of those issues when they arrive in the school?

(Untranscribable comment and laughter)

**ANG:** To be honest yes I think there are certain things that the girls just seem to go for and the boys seem to go for and behaviours that the boys have and year after year it's shown to be the same, the way they group together the way they interact with each other that whole bravado thing that wee shot of testosterone that they get at the age of four-ish. You can see it coming through with the girls much more social much more organized they're the one that you can always rely on to be the better tidy up team they seem to have those skills

**CW**: So would you say then that when they arrive their for want of a better word, their behaviour is more conducive to settling in and starting to learn in the nursery or is it not a case of that

**ANG:** Emmm… I think we're aware I certainly wouldn't bring a group of boys in together

**CW:** Ok

**ANG:** I mix them up and I'm also very aware at the beginning of the year that I have lots of activities out that allow the boys the freedom to move about and be that bit more boisterous and gradually you pull them into rein and you try and get them more focused…I'm aware of that difference that they will have different needs when they walk through the door than the girls

**CW**: So you do sort of build that into your curriculum planning

**ANG**: Definitely

**7. Curriculum and assessment**

The purpose of the Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education is to provide a framework for those working with young children in a variety of different pre-school settings. It outlines the learning opportunities which should be made available to young children through play and experiences and uses examples of anticipated learning outcomes for each of the six curricular areas to provide support for staff in planning the 'curriculum' and assessing the achievements of the children. The six areas of the curriculum are

- The Arts
- Language Development
- Early Mathematical Experiences
- Personal, Social and Emotional Development
- Physical Development and Movement
- The World Around Us

The document provides information on the opportunities children should be provided with in each of the six areas and also a progress in learning section, which provides the characteristics of a child who has experienced suitable play. The final assessments are in the form of Pre-school Transition forms which must be filled out for every child progressing to year one of primary school and she indicates to me that her final assessment are based on a combination of year round observations and a concentrated period of assessment of each child's progress at the time of the forms completion. She emphasises that the key to the transition forms is to focus on the positive and to pick out key areas of the curriculum where each child has made progress and that she has found this particularly necessary this year because she feels the parents do not generally have a positive view of their children's assessment. During part of the conversation about the possible link between children's home background and their learning she explains this to me:

**ANG**: The children all get settling in reports ok and they're quite general they give ideas of play patterns and potential schemas that the children are involved in emmmm basically where they're at emotionally etc. Now, this year they were written down in a wee bit more detail and I was probably more honest with the parents than I would usually be and the feedback from nearly all the parents who got those reports was 'What are you doing writing about my child sure they're only in nursery. Why are you writing stuff about my child do you expect them to be able to do such and such' Even the parents who came back with very positive, I mean they were all positive, but with more positive points maybe, were still shocked that their children were in an educational institution and someone was actually writing about them, assessing them and they see that as very negative the parents don't like the fact that you have them in and you're talking about curriculum that there are expectations of their children at certain ages you hear 'sure they're only four they're only wee'…….Ehh…Yes but we have six areas in our curriculum which is the starting point it's not to prepare them to start learning it is actually the start point. It should prepare them for more formal learning in later days

**CW**: Right so

**ANG**: I would say that the parents' expectations of learning aren't positive. To them learning happens when you're in P6 learning doesn't happen here because they're only babies, only wee-uns

During our interview I also asked her if she feels the friendship patterns the children form may impact on their learning.

**CW:** Yes so their friends and who they play with does that affect their choices?

**ANG:** For some of them, definitely they have to play with the perceived top group and you'll see, say with the sand they'll all have to go to the sand together

**CW:** Well a lot of it I have seen, for example in the mornings you can see, even when I have gone and sat with them before everything kicks off in the morning, they were already 'are you going to play with me and we'll go here' and it does make me wonder, which is why I am asking you, how much does their friendship group influence the things they get an opportunity to learn about?

**ANG:** Yes, we're aware of that at times and very often I will decide where the children are going and that is sometimes seen as a bit mean 'well I really wanted to play with such and such' (puts on crying voice) and you say 'but come on and see what we're going to do at the water today' and 'you're going to play with such and such' and we stay where we play because we don't want them to wander off and come back here again because I want Anna to have a chance to play at the water today because I want her to do that for herself

**CW:** So is that your way of ensuring that the children get to experience many different activities

**ANG:** It's to do with comfort with others as well; if they're only comfortable with certain children and then that person's off for the day then they don't know where to go or what to do when they get there

**CW:** do you think are there differences in that between the genders you know are girls more likely to do it than boys or do you think it's fairly equal

**ANG:** More of the girls seem to want to play socially together I mean a wee boy like Steven, he wouldn't give a monkeys where anybody else was he wants the computer that's it regardless of what anyone else wants. Emmm more of the girls seem to be relying on friendships but there one or two of the less confident children that do that too like wee Alan he'll go where there's a mate as well

**CW:** I've seen him with Connor a lot

**ANG:** Yes! So maybe there's a confidence thing as well

**CW:** So you think it might be confidence from being with the person regardless of the activity.

**ANG:** Certainly, the more able children, the more mature children will be the ones who choose the activity rather than the friendship

Her comments on the issue back up my own observations of the children that they tend to stick to the same activities all of the time and that these choices are heavily regulated by their gender and subsequent friendship patterns. She goes on to talk to me about the individual children and their 'achievement' that year giving me an idea of where they fall on the scale of the classroom and she mentions one girl in particular who is 'driven by the social' as she terms it, her comments clearly demonstrate the impact that friendship groups may have on the learning opportunities of young children.

**ANG:** [] Yes in terms of Anna, I mean she's trying to break into that group and she's more concerned with that than anything else in the room for she's not accessing materials or activities in the room or enjoying the opportunities in the room as much as I would like and that disappoints me.

**CW:** So would she be a more sort of towards the middle of things

**ANG:** Yes the middle because she's capable but because she hasn't got the oomph and the drive to stand up and…. Her personality is failing her, her sensitivity and her shyness is failing her she…If she could overcome that she would be at the top but…and that's her attitude to learning, her attitudes not…She's not driven, there's nothing that's got her going in the room this year and that saddens me that we didn't click into her thing, we didn't get her thing. Nothing overrode that desire for her to be popular and in with the group so…

## 8. Discussion

It is clear from the research that children often choose stereotypically gender polarised activities and games when unstructured play is part of the curriculum and have clear views on what masculinity and femininity should be even at the age of three and four years old. Whilst the children often had differing opinions and ways of positioning both girls and boys we get a clear picture of how their gender identities are not fixed but rather are fluid, complex and multiple.

As Thorne (1993) showed children are actively involved in the construction of their identities through their interactions with peers, and the children involved in this research could be seen to actively construct, maintain and police their identities through their friendships. As has been found in other research young children's friendships and play choices are often delineated by gender and when combined with a curriculum which promotes free and child directed play this research suggests that such play leads to inconsistencies in the experiences children have in the nursery and hence the things they have the opportunity to learn.

The impact of friendship groups is clearly powerful in this instance and it would seem often moulds the learning experiences of the children. Friendship group play often results in children concentrating their play and hence learning on particular areas of the classroom/curriculum and the possibility that this may impact on their progress, development and achievement, not only in the nursery itself, but also in their future education. Brooker (2006) shows how these self and peer group initiated boundaries allow gender segregation and exclusionary practices to blossom and may become more fixed as children progress through the early years of their education.

The boundaries described by Brooker are clearly evident in my own research and I would argue that they also result in self and peer group imposed boundaries to learning. Despite the fact that the children's identities were multiple, fluid and dependent upon the discursive environment in which they where situated, their identity construction/maintenance constantly prescribed the activities and play that they were able to engage in and hence the things they had the opportunity to learn. Gender therefore had a significant influence on the achievement of children in the early years and led to highly gendered experiences of learning.

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